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Get on board for the latest craze: kids are rediscovering the age-old game of chess

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Check Mates

BY EVAN LEVY

With a flick of the wrist, your deadly enemy is demolished and you're in an indisputable position of power. But wait! Your opponent counterstrikes--and the chase is on again.

The latest computer game? Nope. The hot game of the moment is... chess.

While the game is not new, its popularity certainly is. What was once a nerd game is now played by kids from the inner city to outermost suburbia. The U.S. Chess Federation counted 31,167 members age 14 and under in 2000, up from 3,266 members in 1990. So why is chess on the rise?

In some areas, school administrators find chess an easily teachable, inexpensive way to keep students occupied and accounted for after school. The many parents who are signing up children for after-school programs and tournaments view chess as an "intellectual" exercise that can help their kids do better in school--especially in math.

Can chess live up to such great expectations? Robert M. Snyder, who wrote Chess for Juniors and runs a program by the same name in Fort Collins, Colo., thinks it can. "Today the world is so technology oriented that you need brainpower, not brawn, to compete," he says. Not only can chess improve logic, concentration and focus, but it also helps kids realize the consequences of their actions. "If you don't pay attention in school, you might not see the consequences right away," says Tom Brownscombe, scholastic director of the U.S. Chess Federation. "If you lose your queen in chess, it forces you to pay attention."

Many parents also view chess as an activity with social benefits. You have to be a graceful loser--and winner--in front of peers. Plus, the game is fairly democratic. You need a certain build to try out for the football team or a certain amount of money to play golf, but chess cuts across racial, economic and gender barriers. All you need, besides an opponent,

is a board and 32 pieces.

Your school has no program? Robert Ferguson, who runs the American Chess School in Bradford, Pa., and has done extensive research on chess, has found that the Internet has made the game widely available. If you can't find an opponent in your neighborhood, there may be someone in Des Moines, Iowa, willing to play.

As the game gets more exposure, chess is actually becoming hip. Some of the new cachet comes from chess teachers like Mario Leal, 25, who runs the Waco, Texas, Chess Club and has become a local celebrity on TV. "Kids read my name in the paper and think chess is cool," he explains. "And they see other kids playing and think, Hey, they're like me."

The 1993 movie Searching for Bobby Fischer, about a chess prodigy, also inspires. Although Bruce Pandolfini, one of the most experienced chess teachers in the world (played by Ben Kingsley in the movie), concedes that the flick may have given chess a boost, he points out that the game would never last without the deep satisfaction it can deliver. "If you find something you're good in, it explodes across your whole life," he explains. "You feel that if you're good at one thing, you can be good at almost anything."

To focus only on the intellectual dimension, though, misses something fundamental. While Noah Belcher, 11, a top-ranked player from Bloomingburg, N.Y., relishes the mental challenge, he also admits, "I like the castles and the knights--you get to move them all around." Noah's brother Christopher, 14, has perhaps the most succinct explanation of why he and so many others play: "It's really fun. Once you get to know it, it's hard to stop playing." Fortunately, chess is a game that can last a lifetime. .

From: American Chess School <amchess@penn.com>
Subject: FREE summary of chess research and educational benefits
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